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PLATO'S USE OF THE SOCRATIC METHOD

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF
ARTS IN LOYOLA UNIVERSITY

AUGUST

1940

VITA AUCTORIS

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CHAPTER I

DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOCRATIC METHOD

Method is the cry of our age. Whether enjoying leisure or engaged in labor or learning, we always are on the alert for method. We are nearly as interested in HOW a man does a thing as in WHAT he does. Youth not only admires the wondrous feats of its favorite hero-athletes, but studies their technique for home-run hitting and backhand drives on the cereal boxes which adorn the breakfast table. Efficiency experts are introducing system into our offices and factories to the great advantage of industry, for system saves time, energy, and money. Even the seekers after wisdom have not escaped from this interest. Research students are prepared for success in their field by drill in method, whether historical, scientific, or philosophical. And teachers, who of old were rated according to their learning, now are not ranked among the best until they have mastered the methods of teaching.

Though this interest in method is more pronounced in our own day, it is by no means the result of a new discovery, for method dates back to the days of Socrates, as we shall see. But before we go into the history of method, it seems proper to examine whether the study of method is deserving of the attention which it receives.

Far from being a waste of time, this study of method holds great profit for us, for without knowing "HOW" we can not hope, except by chance, to improve our ability in any field. Particularly is this true in the sciences, our particular interest in this thesis. (Science is here to be

taken in the proper sense of knowing a thing in its causes, and is not limited, therefore to mere physical science.) Method and science have ever been associated inseparably, for method is the vehicle of science. Just as a vehicle is a great help to the traveler on his journey, so method helps science on its way towards truth.

Method is defined in logic books as "a system of right procedure for the attainment of truth." System always denotes a fixed and definite series of steps towards an end; it denotes the order of acts one must follow in order to assure the easiest, or quickest, or most certain arrival at one's objective. In science, as the definition declares, the objective of method is the attainment of truth. Now a man can attain truth either by his own unassisted efforts or by the instruction of another, and in either case succeeds best if method is used. Sometimes the method is the same for both research and instruction because of the natural connection between investigation and instruction. In the one case the student works out a problem independently. In the other he solves a problem with the aid of a teacher, who outlines the steps leading to the solution. The method which serves this twofold function is of double value in science.

An example will illustrate what is meant by method and will be a convincing proof of its value for getting at the truth. A sophomore in high school receives his first introduction to Caesar and translation. The teacher, if he is a master of his art, begins the work by showing the student how to translate a sentence, how to look first for the verb, then for its subject and its object, then for modifying words, phrases, and clauses. The scheme is simple yet definite, and by frequent practice the student acquires it as a habit, and therewith facility in reading his Caesar; by this device he finds

what he is searching for, the meaning of sentences and paragraphs; in short he finds the truth. (Not that we wish to confuse facility in reading Latin with mere introductory and mechanical method. Facility in reading is rather a result of the regular use of this method. From it is acquired the Latin habit, distinct from the English, of seeing a longe the relationship of words, whereas in English relationships are indicated almost immediately.) On the other hand, if a lad has never been taught the proper manner of translating, or if by his own fault he has never practised it, he may bungle along for years without acquiring any proficiency in reading, and at the end of his course be able to make sense out of his Virgil and Cicero, or even Caesar, only with the help of a slavish translation. He fails in the purpose of his study because he has no method.

Furthermore this same method serves as a means of instruction as well as of discovery. If the student is required to help one of his troubled classmates, his clearest means of explanation will be to renew the steps by which he arrived at the translation. He will point out the verb, its subject, object, and modifiers. When asked to explain a difficult word, he will then relate the facts about the word according to the steps, determined by convention and good sense, which he took to arrive at them. If this word is a noun, he will give the declension, gender, number, and case, and the reason for its case. In other words, this exposition institutes in the mind of his hearer the same process of investigation as was carried on in his own mind.

That the Socratic method possesses this twofold value for investigation and instruction will be established in Chapters III and IV. For the present we turn to history for still further proof of the value of method in general.

In the ages of greatest progress in philosophy, method has been most flourishing. The philosophy of Greece reached its apex in Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, who alone of those early philosophers had a very exact notion of method. After Aristotle, method and philosophy declined together, proving that method, even though it is of itself insufficient without the aid of genius to produce preeminence in philosophy, nevertheless is a necessary help to philosophical preeminence. In a later age when philosophy once more shook off its torpor by the genius of the scholastics, method became more clearly defined in exact proportion to the progress of philosophy. With Abelard, St. Albert the Great, St. Bonaventure, philosophy and method improved more and more, until they reached their apogee in St. Thomas Aquinas. St. Thomas' method has become synonymous with the scholastic method, by which scholasticism has been kept alive and vigorous whenever followed with exactitude. The decline of scholasticism would not have taken place in the fourteenth century had not philosophers allowed the scholastic method to degenerate into mere formalism. Formalism, it is to be observed, is that corruption of right method whereby the weight of emphasis is placed on correct procedure rather than on the object of method, the discovery of truth. The fourteenth century scholastics foolishly turned their attention from this principal function of method to a secondary function, its eristic possibilities. They no longer sought to find truth but to win arguments.

The greatest service has been rendered to the physical sciences, also by method; namely, the scientific method. The rapid progress made in physics and chemistry as soon as the scientific method was generally applied proves its value to these sciences. The scientific method has raised chemistry from the superstitions of alchemy, has saved physics from blundering

guesses, has made our age outstanding for its discoveries, machinery, industry, and modern conveniences.

Such is the value of method. What then is its origin? Some sort of method has always existed among scholars, for man as a rational being naturally chooses means to an end. But the excellence of these means depends upon the competence of the man choosing them and upon the tradition he inherits from his predecessors. Wherefore, because of the want of genius and tradition, science lacked a well developed method until the time of Socrates.

When Thales proposed his famous question, "What is the one thing the world is made of?" there was no dearth of philosophizing on the point, and no dearth of divergent answers. Thales himself thought the ultimate constituent was water. Anaximenes said it was $\piνεύμα$, air; Pythagoras said number; and Heraclitus said fire. But they had no method for settling the question, for they arrived at the answers for the most part by guess work. They posited their hypotheses on a very superficial consideration of sense data. They had no means of checking up on their conclusions, no way of proving their own theory, or of disproving conflicting theories. Without some salutary method their theories seemed as plausible as their lungs were strong and their repetitions frequent.

The assumption of Thales that all things are one later on led to further speculation about the one and the many. In defense of Thales' assumption, Parmenides enuntiated his dilemma, "Ex ente non fit ens, neque ex non-ente. Ergo ens non mutatur. Ergo est unum." Empedocles held the opposite, that being is multiple, that the earth is composed of four elements, earth, air, fire, and water. In the logical reasoning of Parmenides we detect the beginnings of method, and we have Plato's own authority for it that

Parmenides used a method, an argument from exclusion, which in the dialogue Parmenides he is represented as teaching to Socrates. Another early philosopher who had an idea of method is Zeno, a younger contemporary of Parmenides, whom Aristotle called the originator of dialectic.¹ But method was not yet sufficiently developed among these men to settle the question of the one and the many, and, as a result, various schools were at loggerheads, philosophy stagnated, and gradually fell into disrepute.

Disgusted with the seeming uselessness of these philosophic squabbles, the sophists initiated a new kind of learning, of which they were the teachers, the art of making one's way. Now this utilitarian education was based on the principle that truth is relative, a conclusion which the sophists drew from the uncertainty of preceding philosophers' theories. However, since the sophists deserted speculation, they contributed nothing to speculative method. But they did add something to expository method in their development of rhetoric and dialectic.

Socrates, however, by his inquisitiveness and acquisitiveness, from talking with the philosophers Parmenides and Zeno, from association with the sophists, learned and evaluated all that was known at the time about philosophical method. He did not care for the problems of the early philosophers, but was interested in the ethical questions of the sophists, though he disagreed with their scepticism; above all, he clearly saw that philosophical speculation of any sort requires a method. From the Eleatics, Parmenides and Zeno, he drew what help he could, and then set out to formulate his own method. He succeeded and gave philosophy new vigor by providing it with a definite means of investigating problems, drawing conclusions, and testing them. All previous methods had been fragmentary and vague, by no

means well defined or complete like the method of Socrates. Realizing that his method was valuable, and seeing the necessity of it in philosophy, he taught it with insistence to his disciples, declaring that if he knew nothing else, he did know the right way of searching for truth.

The disciple most capable of appreciating Socrates' method was Plato. In addition to being of kindred genius with Socrates, Plato conceived the deepest esteem for his master. Moved by admiration of the man, Plato preserved in his works an accurate portrait of Socrates' character; in admiration of his philosophy and method, Plato recorded Socrates' unwritten doctrines and means of procedure. Not only in the early dialogues, where he delineates the character and doctrine of Socrates, but in many of his later dialogues, Plato employs the Socratic method, for he realized its value for his own advanced study. Plato did not stop investigating where Socrates had stopped, but went on to consider problems untouched by Socrates, especially the question of reality. Moreover, when Plato set down his conclusions and discoveries in writing, he saw in the Socratic method a valuable expository device, suited for rendering abstruse subject matter interesting, forceful, and clear. It is the dramatic dialogue which has made Plato famous as a man of letters as well as a philosopher.

Here then is the history of the development of a philosophical method among the Greeks. Without a definite method, the pre-Socratics came to a deadlock, and philosophy became retrogressive instead of progressive. The sophists contributed little more to the development of method than a stimulus to the study of dialectic. Socrates, insisting on the necessity of method, himself formulated from the previous beginning a complete and finished method. And finally, whereas Socrates had been largely concerned with

developing and popularizing his method, Plato proved its value in extensive research, establishing by its aid his own system of philosophy.

It remains now to be seen just what the Socratic method is and why it is of such great importance to the pursuit of knowledge. This chapter may well be concluded with M.E.J.Taylor's tribute to the Socratic method:

In the application of his method of attaining knowledge Socrates had confined himself to arriving at clear conceptions of the meaning of moral terms. But in the method itself there was nothing to necessitate this limitation. The attainment of clear and consistent conceptions is the way of knowledge not only in regard to morals but in every department of truth. This is one direction in which Socraticism widened out into Platonism. The search for truth is no longer confined to the truth that bears on human life. The method of Socrates must be applied to the whole range of human knowledge.²

NOTES TO CHAPTER I

1. Aristotle, Sophists, (ap. Diogenes Laertius, ix, 25)
2. Taylor, M.E.J., Greek Philosophy, p. 86

CHAPTER II

DEFINITION AND EXPLANATION OF THE SOCRATIC METHOD

In the last chapter we saw the development of logical method among the early philosophers and its culmination in the method of Socrates. In this chapter we shall consider the nature and peculiarities of his method and formulate for ourselves a definition of it.

It is to be noted that it is not our purpose in this chapter to consider questions closely related to the Socratic method, which do not pertain directly to our problem. Hence it is not our concern whether Plato improved on the method as he received it from his master; nor again to consider Plato's development of Socrates' philosophical doctrines; not the validity of these doctrines. Nor shall we even treat of the whole of the logical system of Plato, i.e., his theory of cognition and his theory of ideas. But we shall confine our considerations to the logic of the method which he employed, defining, analyzing, and explaining it; and attempting to give some idea of the plan which Socrates followed in his method of questioning, the principles on which it is based, and, in later chapters, the value of this method.

In seeking to define the Socratic method, how better may we start than by doing just what Socrates himself would have done in a similar situation? He would have begun by collecting what he and his listeners already knew about the matter, thus forming a tentative theory, and then testing it with careful reasoning. So plumbing our own fund of knowledge, we know first that the method of Socrates is to ask and answer questions (τὸ ἐρωτᾶν καὶ ἀποκρίνεσθαι), a systematic plan for philosophical discussion; secondly, that the plan is merely to ask a definition of some term, and then to examine

the answer minutely. Thirdly, we know that the name is derived from Socrates, who originated and popularized this method. Last of all, we know that the purpose for which he used this method was to find out truth for himself and to help others find the truth.

Having these facts, we have the four Aristotelian causes, material, formal, efficient, final, and we know enough to formulate a definition of the method, which may be stated thus: THE SOCRATIC METHOD IS AN INDUCTIVE SYSTEM OF QUESTION AND ANSWER FOR THE PURPOSE OF FINDING AND TEACHING A TRUE UNIVERSAL DEFINITION. An explanation of the individual terms will be necessary to show the adequacy of the definition.

First the Socratic method is a system or method. Logic books define method as a "means of right procedure for finding the truth."¹ It therefore implies regular steps, definite rules, a determined way of going about finding out the truth which is being sought. The question before us then is, "What are the rules which Socrates follows in his method?" In general, they are the steps which may be applied to any logical system. They have been enumerated by Dr. Zeller in Socrates and the Socratic Schools; namely, (1) a realization of ignorance in a particular matter, (2) to search for knowledge of this matter, and (3) to form concepts about it.² In as much as these rules are applicable to all method, they do not yet distinguish the Socratic from any other method, though Dr. Zeller meant them to apply only to the Socratic method. But when we come to consider that which is distinctive of the Socratic method, i.e., inductive questioning, we shall also show the specific application of these three steps to this method.

The distinguishing note of the Socratic method Aristotle has set down, and very properly, as it will appear, as definition and induction:

Now Socrates devoted his attention to the moral virtues, and was the first to seek a general definition of these ... and he naturally inquired into the essence of these things; for he was trying to reason logically, and the starting point of all logical reasoning is the essence... There are two innovations which may fairly be ascribed to Socrates: inductive reasoning and general definition. Both of these are associated with the starting point of scientific knowledge. *δύο γὰρ ἔστιν ἃ τις ἀποδοίη Σωκράτει δίκαιως, τοὺς τ' ἐπακτικούς λόγους καὶ τὸ ὀρίσθαι καθόλου.*³

Not only does Aristotle indicate the fundamental correctness and the logical value of the method, which will be examined in the next chapter, but he also indicates the special characteristics of the method, definition and induction. Sufficient confirmation of Aristotle's statement can be had by merely recalling the content of some of the Socratic dialogues, many of which are nothing more than an attempt to find a general definition of some virtue, by an inductive examination of some proposed definitions. Barring digressions, the Republic is concerned with establishing the nature of justice; the Euthyphro is a consideration of several definitions of holiness; the Protagoras deals with defining virtue in general.

Now the kind of definition which Socrates would require is a scientific or essential definition, which, as the logicians say, is formulated by combining genus with specific difference, just as the genus of our present definition of the Socratic method is SYSTEM and the specific difference is DEFINITION AND INDUCTION. That this is what Socrates expected of a definition is shown by a line from the Euthyphro: "Socrates: Remember^{em} that I did not ask you to give me two or three example of piety, but to explain the general idea which makes all things be pious."⁴ And further from the same dialogue we take this example: "Socrates: And you appear, Euthyphro, when asked what holiness is, not to have been willing to make known its essence to me."⁵

In his system, then, a definition is the first thing which Socrates

requires of his adversary. This person, as often as not, self-confident and assured, makes nothing of the seemingly simple question which Socrates puts to him, thinking it very easy to answer, for the definition asked is of a common concept, such as of justice for example. But unwarily Socrates' adversary may answer without much reflection according to common belief or opinion. He does not consider and declare the essence of the being, but only the common belief about it. This is what Socrates in the dialogue Gorgias⁶ calls answering according to *νόμος* or custom instead of according to *φύσις* or the nature of the thing, as scientific definition requires. Such a definition, hastily given, is very apt to be incorrect or incomplete, as most frequently is the case, so that it is not difficult for Socrates to trip up his opponent, to point out to him his error, and thus employ the first step of a logical method as indicated by Dr. Zeller.

This first step which lies in acquainting the respondent with his ignorance proceeds in this manner. Socrates taking the proffered definition begins to analyze it by applying it to many particular instances of the virtue in question, and quite readily finds an instance where the definition does not fit. For example, the definition of justice given by Polemarchus in the Republic - that justice is to do good to friends and ill to enemies - can not stand, for it falls down in the case of a false friend or a mistaken enemy. From this practice of testing general concepts by applying them to particular instances, the Socratic method receives its inductive character. Hence Aristotle has put down induction as a distinguishing note of Socratic dialectic.

The respondent being shaken in his self-reliance is now ready for the second step, the search for knowledge. The second step is like the first.

Socrates makes the poor fellow propose an emended definition, which is usually given less confidently and only hypothetically. This new attempt Socrates now takes and subjects to the touchstone of concrete instances. If the definition is not without flaw, that is, if it is not an essential definition, which therefore admits no exceptions, Socrates will be sure in his scrutiny to find the flaw. The poor fellow has probably answered again according to νόμος and not according to φύσις, for he has not yet learned how to formulate an essential definition. He will likely blunder on in this way until in despair he quits the discussion or calls upon Socrates to come to his rescue. Then the third step of the method has been reached, when the disputants begin now scientifically to form an essential definition.

In this third step as in the second, proposed definitions are considered as hypotheses until finally established by a careful induction, but there is this difference, that Socrates is prepared now to confirm the hypothesis and not refute it, sometimes even proposing the answer himself. When it is found that the hypothetical definition meets all difficulties, then Socrates will accept it. Often enough, however, the Socratic dialogues never get beyond the second step, for the original question is left unsolved, as in the Euthyphro, Meno, Protagoras.

But the Socratic investigation does not stop with isolated and disconnected concepts; on the contrary, it synthesizes these concepts into a unified science, testing their coherence by the same process as that by which they were first established. This new value of the Socratic method will be explained in Chapter III.

Now in all of these three steps of the method we have seen that a form of induction has been employed. Let us examine the nature of this in-

duction, for it is a characteristic of the Socratic method. Induction, of course, is a process of reasoning, being opposed to that other form of reasoning, deduction. Reasoning, in general, is a process of the mind by which we arrive at the unknown or less known from a consideration of what is well known. Whereas deduction reasons from the better known general truth to the less known particular truth, as "all men are rational, therefore Plato, who is a man, is rational," induction proceeds from the better known particular instance to the less known general truth, as for example we come to know the existence of a cause by the observance of its effects - that there is a fire in the woods from the smoke curling out of the trees. Induction, of course, is the process we should expect Plato to use in the Socratic dialogues, since he is looking for a general definition which is formed by abstracting what is common from the inferiors under its extension. And this is exactly Socrates' procedure, as can be seen from a very cursory examination of anyone of the dialogues. He examines many particular instances for the sake of finding a general notion. Were he, for instance, to seek to know what justice is, he would consider what justice is in the shoemaker, the baker, the trainer of athletes, the physician, and so on. This homely, concrete, and simple method led some of his contemporaries to believe that he was a trifler in philosophy, since his language was not abstruse and unintelligible. The truth is that by his method he made philosophy comprehensible to the average man.

It is to be noted, however, that though induction of this sort is the characteristic mark of the Socratic method, we do not mean at all to declare that Socrates did not also use deduction. Pure induction, relying in no wise on deduction, would prove a vain and inadequate means of advancing science, for the best induction is based on deduction; viz., that similar

effects have similar causes. A good example of Socratic deduction is found in the Meno, where Socrates puts the slave boy through a rigorous course of geometrical deduction to establish his doctrine of reminiscence.

Though the genuine value of the Socratic dialectic is for finding a correct solution to a problem, nevertheless a more striking feature is its usefulness as an argumentative device. The reader of the dialogues is forever in admiration at the adroit way Socrates has of refuting his opponent, of confronting him with his error, of cutting away the very ground on which he stands. How does Socrates accomplish this effect? How can he, by seemingly harmless and random questions, force his adversary to gradual admissions that soon involve him in a contradiction? Let us try to answer these questions.

Should we wish to know how Socrates was able to refute his adversary so effectually and easily, we must understand two things, first that Socrates, through previous consideration of the matter of discussion, had become familiar with the truth and error in the matter, and second that he had a definite and well worked out plan of argument based on the principles of the syllogism.

Socrates must certainly have come to these verbal jousts prepared. Not that he had foreseen and planned in advance all the turns of the debate, but he had at least thought often and long on the central topic, which usually concerned the nature of some virtue. It would be attributing more than genius to him to suppose that he could be so completely master of a discussion if he had never thought about its subject before. And, as a matter of fact, Socrates is usually the one who proposes the subject of the debate, whence it follows that he will choose one that is familiar to him. And in his advance thinking he had not been superficial. He was not satisfied to

accept as a definition of a concept what men commonly believed. On the contrary, he examined common belief ($\nu\acute{o}\mu\omicron\varsigma$) for himself with his own thorough system of inductive investigation. In other words, he went through in his own mind much the same process as that to which he subjected his victims in debate. When ordinary opinion could not meet the test, he kept up investigating for himself until he had either found the answer or at least discovered many objections to these common opinions. That is the reason why he was never at a loss to urge difficulties against an adversary.

But such complete mastery in argument would never have come to Socrates by mere forethought. Something else was necessary. By forethought he knew what reasons could be brought against his opponent, but real masterful argument required that he present these reasons in the most effective manner. As a champion dialectician he had to get the best psychological and dramatic effect from these reasons. This he did by using a disguised and extended syllogism with which to present his objections.

Every reason, whether advanced to persuade or to refute, can be put into a syllogism. That is, it will consist of three propositions, a major premise, a minor premise, and the conclusion which is deduced from the premises. The major should be a statement conceded in whole or in part by the opposition. The same is true of the minor. But the conclusion drawn from these premises should be some new proposition not previously admitted. Then it is the task of the opposition to show a flaw in the premises, in order to disprove the conclusion. But if the argument is cleverly framed, it is hard to find the flaw, and impossible, of course, if there is no flaw. The skilled controversialist, therefore, has a great advantage, and a controversialist who is also on the right side, as Socrates usually was, is un-

beatable.

Socrates, perceiving some flaw in his adversary's statement, might have pointed out to him without delay the weak spot. But that would not have been very startling or convincing. The psychology of Socrates' method is to get a person to condemn himself by his own admissions. Then the impression will be more lasting. Instead therefore of the whole rebuttal at once, Socrates feeds it out in small nibbles until the victim is ready for the hook. These nibbles are the admissions which the adversary concedes to Socrates, and are nothing more than a multiple major premise to a syllogistic objection. They are particular instances, concrete examples, of an abstract major, which, because of their simplicity and seemingly harmless character, even the wary would readily admit. And then it is only the turn of a hand to advance as a minor the general principles on which these admissions are based, and the opponent is wide-eyed with wonder at the destruction of his argument and at his own foolishness.

But Socrates' rambling syllogism is an even better device in debating than the regular syllogism; it conceals better the conclusion he is about to establish, until at the proper moment he drops it like a bomb in his adversary's lap.

Again we see the reason why the Socratic method is said to be inductive. This multiple major premise of Socrates' objection is composed of individual applications of the same principle. From particulars, Socrates infers a general notion.

One of many examples of this rambling syllogism effecting a startling refutation may be found in the Meno⁶. Socrates refutes Meno's statement that virtue is different for different classes of people; as for a man,

the wise management of civic affairs; for a woman, the careful management of the household and obedience to her husband; etc. The refutation in strict syllogistic form is as follows:

MAJOR PREMISE: Justice and temperance are required for man, woman, and child

that they may perform their various offices virtuously.

MINOR PREMISE: But this is to be virtuous in the same way.

CONCLUSION: Therefore virtue is the same for all.

But in the dialogue Socrates gives out the major in slow stages by asking particular questions: "Can a man manage the state well without justice and temperance? Can a woman manage her house well without them? Can a child obey without them?" Meno makes no difficulty about admitting these individually, but in so doing prepares himself for defeat, for he is also implicitly admitting the minor.

Considered in this light, there appears a striking likeness between the manner Socrates has of proposing objections and the corresponding method of scholastic philosophers. Both make their objection for the purpose of rebuttal, or, at least, to force the opposition to establish its point more firmly. Both use substantially the same form with this difference, however, that Socrates is much less formal. An analysis of a Socratic elenchy will best illustrate the plan of Socratic rebuttal and its similarity to the scholastic objection.

In the dialogue Euthyphro, Euthyphro defines holiness for Socrates as attendance on or service of the gods. Socrates' refutation boiled down to a scholastic syllogism comes to this:

MAJOR: Service supposes benefit to the recipient. (Proved by analogy)

MINOR: But man can not benefit the gods.

CONCLUSION: Therefore holiness is not service of the gods.

Here is the argument as Socrates actually put it:

SCHOLASTIC DIVISIONS

DIALOGUE

Definition
(Hypothesis)

Euth. Piety or holiness, Socrates, appears to me to be that part of justice which attends to the gods, as there is the other part of justice which attends to men.

Objection

Soc. That is good, Euthyphro; yet still there is a little point about which I should like to have further information. What is the meaning of attention? For attention can hardly be used in the same sense when applied to the gods as when applied to other things.

Major

First instance

For instance, horses are said to require attention, and not every person is able to attend to them, but only a person skilled in horsemanship. Is that not true?

Euth. Quite true.

Soc. I should suppose that the art of horsemanship is the art of attending horses?

Second instance

Euth. Yes.

Soc. Nor is everyone qualified to attend to dogs, but only the huntsman?

Euth. Yes.

Third instance

Soc. As the art of the oxherd is the art of attending to oxen?

Euth. Very true.

Soc. And as holiness or piety is the art of attending to the gods? - that would be your meaning, Euthyphro?

Euth. Yes.

Further step in
major

Soc. And is not attention always designed for the good or benefit of that to which the attention is given? As in the case of horses, you may observe that when attended to by the horseman's art they are benefitted and improved, are they not?

Euth. True.

Soc. As the dogs are benefitted by the huntsman's art, and the oxen by the art of the oxherd, and all other things are tended or not attended for their good and not for their hurt?

Euth. Certainly not for their hurt.

Soc. But for their good?

Euth. Certainly.

Minor

Soc. And does not piety or holiness, which has been defined as the art of attending to the gods, benefit or improve them? Would you say that when you do a holy act you make any of

the gods better?

Euth. No, no; that is certainly not my meaning.⁸

Conclusion is
understood

Another mark of the Socratic method besides definition and induction is the personality of its originator. The Socratic method would not be complete unless it were permeated with the humor, irony, and acuteness of Socrates. Though these elements do not constitute the essence of the method, they are at least proper notes, which can not be taken away without great loss to it. One has only to read any dialogue to catch the vein of gentle irony and pleasant banter. We quote but two examples of the many we should like to give. In the following passage Socrates addresses Euthydemus in the dialogue of the same name:

What you have next to do is to give us a display of exhorting this youth as to how he should devote himself to wisdom and virtue. But first I shall explain how I regard this matter and how I desire to hear it dealt with. If I strike you as treating it in a crude and ridiculous manner, do not laugh me to scorn; for in my eagerness to listen to your wisdom I shall venture to improvise in your presence. So both you and your disciples must restrain yourselves and listen without laughing.⁹

And in the Meno Socrates replies to being compared to the torpedo fish:

"I perceive your aim in thus comparing me."

"What was it?"

"That I might compare you in return. One thing I know about all handsome people is this - they delight in being compared to something. They do well over it, since fine features, I suppose, must have fine similes. But I am not for playing your game. As for me, if the torpedo is torpid itself while causing others to be torpid, I am like it, but not otherwise. For it is not on account of any sureness in myself that I cause others to doubt; it is from being more in doubt myself than anyone else that I cause others to doubt. So now for my part I have no idea what virtue is, whilst you, though perhaps you may have known before you came in touch with me, are now as good as ignorant of it also. But none the less I am willing to join with you in examining it and inquiring into its nature."¹⁰

Finally the definition of the Socratic method would not be complete unless we indicated its purpose; namely, to find truth. "I have no particu-

lar liking for anything but the truth," Socrates says in the Euthyphro.¹¹

The Socratic method is not intended merely as a clever instrument for giving a display of dialectical skill at the expense of some less skillful person regardless of the truth of the conclusions reached. This was the way of the sophists. Their aim was to make a man a skilled logician and debater so that he could win any case in the law courts, even making the weaker argument appear the better. Though the logical principles of the Socratic method might be twisted to such a use, this is not the purpose for which Socrates intended the method. He was anxious to discover truth and to help others discover it. Often he refers to himself as a midwife helping others to bring forth ideas. And the pain and confusion which he caused them was not for its own sake, but for the sake of truth. Realizing the value of his method in the quest of truth, he was anxious to pass it on to others.

To summarize: The Socratic method, like any logical method, consists of three steps; first, to determine just what is known and what is not known; then to search for enlightenment on the unknown by forming hypotheses. When these hypotheses have been tested and proved, and only then, will they be accepted. The content of the hypotheses in the Socratic method is, as a rule, the definition of a universal idea. The manner of testing the validity of the definition is by induction, i.e., by applying it for verification to many particular cases. This induction is of value not only in establishing a definition but in demonstrating to an adversary his errors and in convincing him of one's own position.

Socrates used the method with the best psychological effect, because he understood the principles of the syllogism, on which his method like all dialectic is based. Confident and pugnacious adversaries were always

stopped short by one of his rambling syllogisms. The major consists of particular instances of a general principle, and in this principle the minor is implicitly contained. Ready assent to the particular instances in the major was the signal of defeat, for Socrates then put forth the minor, with consequent disaster to his foe.

The purpose of the method is to discover truth. Refutation is only secondary.

The chapter may best be concluded by restating the original definition: The Socratic method is an inductive system of question and answer for the purpose of finding and teaching true, universal definitions.

NOTES TO CHAPTER II

1. Clarke, Richard F., S.J., Logic, p. 462
2. Zeller, Dr. Eduard G., Socrates and the Socratic Schools, p. 123
3. Aristotle, Metaphysics, xiii, 4, 1078b
4. Euthyphro, 6D
5. Euthyphro, 12D
6. Gorgias, 483A
7. Meno, 73
8. Euthyphro, 12D - 14A
9. Euthydemus, 278D
10. Meno, 80C
11. Euthyphro, 14D

CHAPTER III

VALUE OF THE SOCRATIC METHOD FOR INVESTIGATING AND FINDING TRUTH

A systematic approach is necessary to the success of any search. In dealing with abstract and subtle matter, the need for system increases in proportion to the subtlety and abstruseness of the subject. That is why philosophers need a method more than any other scholars, as we can readily see from the lack of it in the pre-Socratics. Without method the pre-Socratics and the sophists gave up looking for truth because they thought that all truth was relative, since they were not able to prove conclusively any of their theories. Without method their philosophizing was mere speculation and idle theorizing, so that eventually they abandoned philosophy for the more utilitarian field of persuasion.

Different schools adopted different conclusions, and any thinker of repute was contradicted by some other who seemed to have an equal claim to be heard. Moreover, by different paths all the leading philosophies had led to results that directly or indirectly suggested scepticism as the only possible attitude towards philosophic inquiry. They had all based their theories on the evidence of the senses; and yet nearly all had laid stress on the inadequacy of the senses as witnesses to the truth of things, while some had arrived at conclusions directly contrary to their evidence. Naturally, then, the general attitude towards speculation was one of sceptical indifference.¹

Then Socrates appeared with a really definite method with which he was able to establish conclusively the few assertions that he made and to disprove equally conclusively the false assertions of his predecessors. In other words, method ushered in the use of reason in philosophy and displaced assent to unproved belief.

With a little scrutiny we can see why the Socratic method was a valuable means of finding philosophical truth. In an investigation we seek

above all to exhaust every possibility of gaining information and to avoid every possibility of error. Now the Socratic method fulfills these requirements, as will appear.

Every possibility of gaining information is exhausted, for the Socratic method employs each of the five sources of cognition, beyond which there can be no source of knowledge in the natural order. The testimony of consciousness is pressed into service in the dialogues; for example in the Phaedo, while seeking to establish the theory of reminiscence, Socrates asks, "ἀνὴρ ἐπιστάμενος περὶ ὧν ἐπίσταται ἔχει ἂν δοῦναι λόγον ἢ οὐ; Can a man who knows anything tell that he knows?"² And in the same argument Socrates' estimate of sensation as a source of knowledge is shown: "And we agree, also, that we have not gained knowledge of equality, and that it is impossible to gain this knowledge, except by sight or touch or some other of the senses?"³ Frequently, too, he examines the qualities of sensible objects to help him find his universal idea. The third source, ideas, comes into play with recurring regularity in the Socratic method. Proof: the whole purpose of the method is to examine concepts and find the true universal. Socrates also relied on the authority of others for information, though always cautiously. In fact he made it his life's business to learn from others who might be wiser than himself. In nearly every dialogue we find him the humble inquirer, ironically feigning humility at times, but usually sincere. Yet in the Apology we read how little real knowledge he found in his fellows. But above all Socrates put reason to work, not just at random, but with such thoroughness that, according to his talent and the facts then at his disposal, he exhausted the possibility of this source of cognition.

Reason, or the process of learning the less known from the better

known, has wider application in philosophy than any other of the five sources of cognition. Nor did Socrates overlook the fact that reason is twofold, inductive and deductive, and that he must use both types if he wished to get the most out of his investigatory studies.

Induction is the process by which a general truth is drawn from many particular truths. Since it was Socrates chief purpose to formulate general definitions and universal concepts, he naturally was obliged to use induction principally. A consideration of some of the questions treated in his dialogues will show this necessity. The Republic, we have seen, is concerned on the whole with defining justice; the Euthyphro deals with the question, "What is holiness?"; the Protagoras with, "What is virtue?"; Laches, "What is courage?" Examination of one of these dialogues will demonstrate his inductive method. The Euthyphro is the shortest and perhaps the clearest illustration of his method. When asked to define holiness, Euthyphro gives as his definition one example of holiness; namely, doing what he is doing, prosecuting a wrong-doer. Socrates points out the inadequacy of this particular definition. Then Euthyphro gives a definition which seems to be universal, "Whatever the gods love is holiness." But Socrates proves this wrong by showing that the gods do not agree in their love of all objects. He cites particular examples of cases in which both gods and men disagree about the right and wrong of an act, even though they admit that there is a right and wrong, and a norm or definition of holiness. Euthyphro's final definition, that holiness is to serve the gods, is not accepted unconditionally and there the dialogue ends.

By using the second type of reasoning, deduction, going from the general to the particular, Socrates omits no access to truth. The Timaeus is

almost entirely deductive. We also see this type of reasoning employed even along with induction, for, as we have said in Chapter II, every induction is based on the general principle, similarity in individuals is the result of a similarity in nature. To exemplify from the Euthyphro again, we find the last definition of holiness questioned on the ground that it goes contrary to a deductive principle: the gods, as superior beings, cannot receive benefit from man. Therefore the definition, that holiness is to serve the gods, won't stand on the ground that service implies benefit to another. Another example is found in the Phaedo. After establishing the principle of contradiction by a long induction, Socrates deduces from this principle that the soul, which is essentially the principle of life, can not perish because it can not admit its contrary, death.

The Socratic method, then, is thorough. Zeller points out this quality well:

In a similar way we see Socrates analyzing thoroughly the common notions of his friends. He reminds them of the various sides of every question; he brings out the opposition which every notion contains within itself or in relation to some other; and he aims at correcting by additional observations, assumptions resting on a one-sided experience, at completing them, and giving them a more careful definition.⁴

The fundamental soundness of the Socratic method is shown not only by its understanding use of the faculty of reason, but by its similarity to other approved methods of more recent date. The scientific method was hailed with great acclaim nearly three centuries ago, and today is still admittedly of great worth for its purpose. Briefly this method can be summed up in four steps: (1) observation of numerous facts; (2) drawing a conclusion from these facts, which is put down hypothetically as an explanation of these observed effects; (3) testing this hypothesis by the observation of additional facts;

(4) elevation of the hypothesis to the dignity of a theory or law according to the certainty derived from additional experiment. The points of similarity between the Socratic method and the scientific method are these: (1) the consideration of particular facts which show a common element; (2) the formulation of a hypothesis to explain the common element; (3) the untiring search for additional facts to establish the truth of the hypothesis or of a new one which is better suited to the facts. The dissimilarity between these methods consists primarily in the subject dealt with. The scientific method deals with natural phenomena, the data of physical science, while the Socratic method treats of philosophical concepts. There is a slight dissimilarity in this, too, that the Socratic method posits its hypothesis before any preliminary observation and then tests the hypothesis with individual instances. It assumes the initial observation as a part of the disputants' experience.

There is yet another method to which the Socratic method bears great resemblance, the scholastic method, which is quite the opposite of the scientific method, but no less useful in its field of investigation. In the scholastic method facts are investigated and the truth found out not by induction, but by deduction. This method consists of five steps: (1) the accurate statement of the question; (2) a brief summary of the various solutions to the question; (3) the statement and explanation of the correct doctrine (as the author sees it); (4) the proof of this doctrine by deduction; (5) the defense of the doctrine against all objections of adversaries. The points of similarity between these two methods are (1) the careful statement of the issue, (2) the choice of an opinion or of a well established hypothesis, (3) the positive proof and subsequent defense of this position against all possible objections. The two methods are unlike in this that the Soc-

ratio method presents the process by which one arrives at a conclusion, whereas the scholastic method gives an exposition of the conclusion arrived at and its defense, without indicating the process by which it was reached. In other words, the Socratic method is chiefly analytic, the scholastic, synthetic.

By reason of the similarity with these two divergent methods, the Socratic method is a combination of the two, uniting the advantages of both. It brings scientific induction to philosophical questions. It uses the careful definition, argument, and defense of the scholastic method.

Another advantage of the Socratic method is that it requires a discussion between two or more persons. Since "two heads are better than one," the possibility of error is decreased and the chances of new discovery are increased. A man speculating in the privacy of his study lacks the inspiration of suggestion from his fellows and their restraining influence, for lights and objections easily occur to others that may readily be overlooked by the solitary thinker. Discussion naturally brings out all the aspects of a question, increases the understanding of all parties to that discussion.

Again we may see the value of this method from an argument based on authority. Not to mention Xenophon and other followers of Socrates, Plato thought so highly of the method which he had learned from his old master, that he used it in his own private researches and taught it in his dialogues. Nor was Plato incapable of judging of the worth of his preceptor's teaching, for he did not hesitate to enlarge on Socratic doctrines, even change them when necessary. "The method of Socrates soon led Plato to regions of thought far beyond its original scope and purpose."⁵ Despite this Plato still clung to the method of Socrates almost to his last written work. It was only to-

wards the end of his career that Plato abandoned the dialogue method in his writings, setting down his last three works in nearly continuous discourse, the Timaeus, Critias, and the Laws. But we may believe that the mental habits acquired as a youth did not desert him in his old age, even though his writings did not advertise them as much as before; that, though as an old man he did not favor the question and answer method as a literary vehicle, he had not lost any of his appreciation for it as an investigatory medium.

No matter how excellent the Socratic method may seem theoretically, its true worth stands or falls on the actual results of the method. Was the Socratic method in the hands of Plato and Socrates productive of any real discoveries and new truths? That question may be answered in the affirmative.

The first of the practical fruits of this method came from Socrates in the form of a series of clearly defined concepts. These concepts were chiefly ethical, but also political and metaphysical. So far no definite philosophical system may be said to have been evolved, but clear concepts are the basis of any system of philosophy and the necessary foundation of any progress to a correct system. To begin with false premises and false ideas is to court error in the conclusions derived therefrom. In the Socratic concepts lay the beginnings of a system of epistemology and of ethics.

But in Plato we see a complete system of philosophy evolved, a system that embraces "physics, dialectic, ethics, theology, and aesthetics,"⁶ a system founded on the theory of Ideas. According to this theory the only realities are the Ideas, or the types of the sensible objects around us. These Ideas ascend by degrees to the highest Idea, ἡ ἰδέα τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, the Good. True wisdom is a knowledge of these absolute essences, and this knowledge can be obtained only by use of dialectic, that is to say by use of

the Socratic method. That there were many errors in this system, we admit, and yet that many true doctrines were the result of this system can not be denied. Even the system itself, i.e., its fundamental concept, that essences are real "a parte rei," is defended by such a great philosopher as St. Augustine. He would have us believe that Plato meant that these Ideas have their real existence in the mind of God; and indeed Plato does say that they have existence in a heavenly sphere (τόπος νοητός). If this were Plato's real meaning (though most scholars following Aristotle deny it) our case would be that much stronger. But even admitting this error, we can point out many useful and true results of Plato's system.

First of all, the theory of Ideas was the first enunciation of the universal idea and raised a problem before not considered, the problem of the reality of this universal. Though Plato's answer was false, he laid the groundwork that enabled Aristotle to give the right answer.

Secondly, Plato, at least indirectly, propounded a doctrine much needed at the time and frequently denied by the sophists; namely, that truth is absolute. Throughout the Phaedo, Parmenides, and Republic, he insists that the Ideas, the eternal and absolute realities, are true. Since they are unchanging, truth, too, never changes. Other things are true because they partake of these absolute entities.

I think that if anything is beautiful besides absolute beauty it is beautiful for no other reason than because it partakes of absolute beauty; and this applies to everything.⁷

The fundamental error of the system does not affect the validity of this argument, for essences are true and unchangeable whether their real, separate existence is in the objective or subjective order. Plato's contribution in this respect has been set forth by Lutoslawski:

Plato reached a degree of certitude not experienced before. He created an ideal of infallible knowledge, far above traditional opinions, and he distinguished this scientific knowledge from common belief, by his ability to show a reason for each assertion. The methodical connection of thought gave to his conclusions a permanence and consistency which unscientific opinion never reaches.⁸

Plato's third important addition to philosophy is the defense of the existence and immortality of the soul. The soul exists because man knows the Ideas, abstract and intangible to the senses. But the body can not know them. So there must be a spiritual soul which knows them. In the Phaedo he asks:

Now about such things as this, Simmias. Do we think there is such a thing as absolute justice or not? ... And absolute beauty and goodness? ... Is their true nature contemplated by means of the body?⁹

The answer is not by means of the body, but by the soul.

The immortality of the soul is defended by five arguments in the Phaedo. Of these arguments, one at least is valid: the soul, since it knows the Ideas, is like them, simple and uncompounded; therefore it can not fall into corruption and perish. Nor was the immortality which Plato preached a vague existence not calculated to win any man's belief or desire. Rather he thought of the future life nearly in terms of our Christian beatitude.

"But how shall we bury you?"

"However you please," he replied, "if you can catch me and I do not get away from you." And he laughed gently, and looking towards us, said: "I can not persuade Crito, my friends, that the Socrates who is now conversing and arranging the details of his argument is really I; he thinks I am the one whom he will presently see a corpse, and he asks how to bury me. And though I have been saying at great length that after I drink the poison I shall no longer be with you, but shall go away to joys of the blessed you know of, he seems to think that was talk uttered to encourage you and myself."¹⁰

But perhaps the most important of the ideas arrived at by Plato through his dialectic method is his doctrine of "the good." The highest of

all the Ideas, the culmination of man's search for knowledge and happiness is τὸ ἀγαθόν. Some authors would have us believe that Plato identified τὸ ἀγαθόν with our concept of God. Bishop Turner goes so far as to say, "The only rational interpretation of Plato's doctrine of the good is that by the Idea of good Plato meant God Himself."¹¹ Whether this is so or not, at least Plato's concept of τὸ ἀγαθόν conforms in several notes to our idea of God. In the Philebus, he reasons to the existence of a creator from the necessity of such a being in view of the order in the universe. In the Republic, τὸ ἀγαθόν is explained as that which when possessed gives complete happiness. This is strikingly like our concept of God as the final cause. For a pagan to have come even so close to the Christian notion of God, no matter how vaguely, argues well for the virtue of his life, the clarity and depth of his understanding, and the value of his method of reasoning.

The arguments then that urge the value of the Socratic method in searching for and finding the truth are briefly these. Theoretically the method is sound, for it enlists in its search all of the five sources of human cognition. In its use of the chief source, reason, it is exhaustive, for it employs both types of reason, deduction and especially induction. Again, the intrinsic worth of the method is shown by the closeness with which both the highly successful scholastic and scientific methods imitated it. Its character of mutual discussion is an added merit. But practically the worth of the Socratic method is demonstrated by the success Socrates and Plato enjoyed from its use. With it Socrates laid down a series of clear concepts about virtue and the origin of knowledge, thus setting up the beginnings of a system of epistemology and ethics. Plato was more successful, pro-

ducing the highly idealistic and beautiful system built on the theory of Ideas. Though the system has been proved false in some points, it is nevertheless responsible for many valuable doctrines: the doctrine of the universal idea and its true solution by Aristotle; the establishment of the absolute character of truth in opposition to the relativistic attitude of the sophists; the doctrine of the immortality of the soul; above all, the first sketch of a theodicy.

Valuable as the Socratic method seems, we are far from contending that it is flawless or without its dangers. But these short-comings are merely accidental and not of its essence. One of these dangers arises from its inductive character. Many of the arguments used are of analogy. Now analogies are only illustrations and not conclusive proofs. Used as such they are helpful, but when used as proofs - provided that the similarity of the analogous objects is not essential - the argument is merely eristic. Plato, though he seems to have realized this danger, was not without sin in this matter. In the Gorgias, he points out the error of such an argument when he rejects Callicles' proof from analogy that "might makes right." Yet he falls into the error himself in the Republic, for he tries to show that women should be warriors in his perfect state by the analogy that female dogs make war alongside of the males. In another example from the Republic, Socrates is seeking to disparage his opponents definition of justice:

"Is not he who can best strike any kind of a blow whether fighting or boxing best able to ward off any kind of blow?"

"Certainly."

And he who can prevent or elude a disease is best able to create one?

True.

And he is best guard of a position who is best able to steal a march on the enemy?

Certainly.

Then he who is a good keeper of anything is also a good thief?

That, I suppose, is to be inferred.

Then if the just man is good at keeping money, he is good at stealing.

So the argument declares.

Then the just man has turned out to be a thief.¹²

"Nothing," says Father Clarke, "can give a better notion of the extreme danger of arguing from a few plausible instances than the ingenious employment of it by the Athenian philosopher (Socrates.)"¹³

Balancing, however, the shortcomings of the method against its merits, there can be no doubt which outweighs the other. Its value has been neatly summarized by Barker:

It was a definite method, as much (we may almost say) as the scholastic method of the Middle Ages; There were rules for the adoption of the theme of discussion, and rules of the relevant answering of the question. It was a method unpleasant for the victim and a method which might become merely eristic, turning the argument in any way for the sake of argument; but it was, all the same, in the hands of Socrates, a genuine organ of truth.¹⁴

NOTES TO CHAPTER III

1. Taylor, Greek Philosophy, p. 55
2. Phaedo, 76B
3. Phaedo, 75B
4. Zeller, Socrates and the Socratic Schools, p. 131
5. Taylor, Greek Philosophy, p. 89
6. Turner, William, S.T.D., History of Philosophy, p. 120
7. Phaedo, 100C
8. Lutoslawski, Wincenty, Origin and Growth of Plato's Logic, p. 216
9. Phaedo, 65D
10. Phaedo, 115 sqq.
11. Turner, History of Philosophy, p. 105
12. Republic, Bk. I, 333E
13. Clarke, Logic, p. 404
14. Barker, Ernest, M.A., Greek Political Theory, p. 87

CHAPTER IV

LITERARY VALUE OF THE SOCRATIC METHOD

Plato's adoption of the Socratic method has been justified, it is hoped, from a philosophical point of view. Now we shall see whether this method did not contribute something more to Plato's writings, a literary value. That Plato's works were literary gems is the opinion of all critics, as of Bishop Turner:

But whatever may be our judgment as to the value of his philosophy, no adverse criticism can detract from his preeminent claim to the first place among masters of philosophical style. Even though we refuse to call him "profound", we cannot but subscribe to the verdict by which all ages agreed to give him the titles divine and sublime. Subsequent speculation, subsequent discovery, and subsequent increase in the facilities for acquiring knowledge have corrected much that Plato taught and added much to what he said, and yet not a single master has appeared who could dream of rivaling, not to say excelling the literary perfection of his philosophical dialogues.¹

It remains for us to show that the Socratic method contributed in some way to this literary preeminence.

We make the assertion, then, that the use of the Socratic method did add to the literary brightness of Plato's works. The subjects on which he chose to write necessarily limited his literary style, but he removed the obstacle, as well as it may be removed, by the use of the Socratic method. Not that we claim that the mere use of the Socratic method has of itself alone produced this effect, no more than we would claim that the use of the form of St. Thomas could enable a mediocre philosopher to write the Summa. But just as the use of St. Thomas' method would help even the mediocre to present his thoughts more effectively, so the Socratic method is a device which Plato, in his genius, chose as an aid to that genius.

In what way does the Socratic method contribute literary

value to Plato's dialogues? It supplies at least five of the six principles of composition. We shall follow the division of Arlo Bates, which seems both sufficiently inclusive and at the same time mutually exclusive. There are three principles of structure and three principles of quality. To quote Bates' words: "The three Principles of Structure-the mechanical principles, so to say, those which direct most obviously the mechanics of language-are Unity, Mass, and Coherence. The three Principles of Quality-those which govern the inner and more intellectual character of a composition-are Clearness, Force, and Elegance."² All but the last named quality, Elegance, are enhanced by the use of the Socratic method.

Of the principles of structure, Unity is the first. Unity is furthered by the Socratic method, since it is according to the requirements of the method that the state of the question be early established and strictly adhered to. Thus one central topic is discussed to the end without useless deviation. Some of the dialogues that seem to lack unity are the Phaedo, Protagoras, and Republic. But this lack is only apparent, for a little study of these dialogues reveals their complete oneness. The Phaedo, it is sometimes said, centers about the question of the immortality of the soul, and again about the theme, "the philosopher should be glad to die." But the one theme is merely a corollary to the other. Socrates, in a lengthy discussion with his friends, shows why he, like a good philosopher, is not afraid to drink the cup of hemlock, because he looks to a happier existence in the next world. His arguments, therefore, in support of the soul's immortality are very much to the point. The Protagoras, with its myths and long speeches, seems to wander from the central topic, the acquisition of virtue. But even the wordy profusions of Protagoras, Prodicus, and Hippias

all bear upon that main topic and fit into the pattern. The Republic, however it may seem to digress, is really remarkable for unity. The main idea, the nature of justice, is carried ever forward in the discussions, whether they be of the nature of the perfect state, the nature of the Ideas, or the future life, for they are merely exemplifying the most perfect form of justice (as Plato thought) in a corporate body, the state, the means of attaining justice, and the reward of justice.

Coherence is clearly one of the fruits of the Socratic method. For coherence means the proper ordering of thought, be that order chronological, topographical, climactic, or logical. Especially in philosophical works, and all works of argumentation, the natural order will be the logical order. But the Socratic method is nothing more than dialectic, a logical system, and logic is but the ordering of thought. Consequently the Socratic method pre-eminently produces coherence in the dialogues.

Mass, the third structural principle, commonly called emphasis (but wrongly it seems), is the principle governing the proper proportioning of matter and treatment to the importance of the ideas. In the dialogues, the important ideas are the ones that need most clarification. Now it is the nature of the Socratic dialectic to remain on a point until it is examined from all sides and thoroughly elucidated. So the important ideas, the ones that need most examination, are naturally given the due amount of stress. In the Phaedo, for example, two arguments for the immortality of the soul, the argument from generation from opposites and the argument from the insociability of contraries, seem to one of the interlocutors to contradict each other. Clearly the arguments should receive more attention than the objection. To these two arguments, then, Plato devotes sections 70 - 72 and 100 - 107;

but the objection he answers in a paragraph, section 103B:

You do not observe the difference between the present doctrine and what we said before. We said before that in the case of concrete things opposites are generated from opposites; whereas now we say that the abstract concept of an opposite can never become its own opposite, either in us or in the world about us. Then we were talking about things which possess opposite qualities and are called after them, but now about those very opposites the immanence of which gives the things their names.

Though the Socratic method naturally aids the user to observe the three principles of structure, almost any method does the same; yet the Socratic method goes beyond other methods in that it is largely responsible in the dialogues for at least two of the principles of quality, clearness and force. The principles of quality are different from those of structure because they create an appeal, an appeal to intellect, emotion, and imagination.

Whatever work interests a reader may be said to touch him in one of three ways: it may appeal to his understanding, to his emotions, or to his imagination. In other words, it may affect him by its intellectual, by its emotional, by its imaginative or aesthetic quality. Bearing in mind that any nomenclature is a matter of convenience, and that we use names chiefly as a means of dividing the subject into portions which may be handled less awkwardly than the whole, we may call these three qualities Clearness, Force, and Elegance.³

Interest or appeal then are the qualities which we shall now look for in the dialogues, and the extent to which they are increased by the Socratic method.

Clearness, joined with the innate interest of the subject, constitutes the intellectual appeal. Clearness is to the intellect what light is to the eye. The eye can not perceive the largest mountain right in front of it if there is no light to illuminate the mountain. Similarly the intellect can not grasp the mountain of meaning that may be packed in such a work as Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, shall we say, without the light of clearness shining upon it. But even abstruse philosophical subjects can be made clear when they are treated as Plato treats them with the Socratic method.

First of the means to obtain clearness is the thorough and deliberate development of each thought. Plato's reasoning moves leisurely from step to step, so that each point may sink into the mind. And time is necessary to comprehend difficult matters, even though the idea be lucidly declared in a second. That is not enough. Beginners and ordinary people need a period of reflection before they make a deep thought their own, no matter how clearly it is put. This consideration for the groping mind, this division of thought into its simplest components, is admirably demonstrated in the Meno. Socrates is questioning the slave boy to show that he has a knowledge of geometry by recollection from a previous existence:

Tell me, boy, do you know that a square figure is like this?

I do.

Now a square figure has these lines, four in number, all equal?

Certainly.

And these, drawn through the middle, are equal too, are they not?

Yes.

And a figure of this sort may be larger or smaller?

To be sure.

Now if this side were two feet and that also two, how many feet would the whole be? Or let me put it thus: if one way it were two feet, and only one foot the other, of course the space would be two feet taken once?

Yes.

But as it is two feet also on that side, it must be twice two feet?

It is.

Then the space is twice two feet?

Yes.

Well how many are twice two feet? Count and tell me.

Four, Socrates.⁴

And so throughout the rest of the demonstration. Not only does the discussion move slowly enough for even the unskilled to comprehend, but the interlocutor has a chance, and in his person the reader, to ask questions and have vague points cleared up:

Then one of those present - I don't remember just who it was - said:
"In Heaven's name, is not this present doctrine the exact opposite

of what was admitted in our earlier discussion, that the greater is generated from the less and the less from the greater and that opposites are always generated from their opposites? But now it seems to me we are saying that this can never happen."⁵

Another means of procuring clearness is by repetition of a thought, a means which Plato employs frequently. Like the step by step development of the last paragraph, repetition of an idea increases the likelihood of comprehension. To exemplify we turn to the Euthydemus:

Come now, of things that are, what sort do we hold to be really good? Or does it appear to be no difficult matter and no problem for an important person, to find here too a ready answer? Anyone will tell us that to be rich is good, surely?

Quite true, he said.

Then it is the same with being healthy and handsome, and having other bodily endowments in plenty?

He agreed.

Again, it is surely clear that good birth and talents and distinctions in one's own country are good things.

He admitted it.

Then what have we still remaining, I asked, in the class of goods? What of being temperate, and just, and brave? I pray you tell me, Cleinias, do you think we shall be right in ranking these as goods, or in rejecting them? For it may be that someone will dispute it. How does it strike you?⁶

Plato uses yet another and more effective way of gaining clearness in his dialogues, illustration. Examples and analogies are the ever present lamps that illumⁱⁿe the shadowy turns of his thought. And most important of all, Plato uses language that is simple and concrete. Shunning the abstract terms and reasoning that most philosophers fall into by reason of their subject, Plato robes his thought in language simple enough for the artisans of Athens to understand, yet deep enough in content to occupy the lifelong rumination of St. Augustine. To illustrate this simplicity, concreteness, and clarification by example, we take a passage from the Republic:

I will proceed by asking a question: Would you not say that a horse has some end?

I should.

And the end or use of a horse or of anything would be that which could not be accomplished, or not so well accomplished, by any other thing?

I do not understand, he said.

Let me explain: Can you see, except with the eye?

Certainly not.

Or hear, except with the ear?

No.

These then may be truly said to be the ends of these organs?

They may.

But you can cut off a vine-branch with a dagger or with a chisel, and in many other ways?

Of course.

And yet not so well as with a pruning-hook made for the purpose? True.

May we not say that this is the end of a pruning hook?

We may.

Then now I think you will have no difficulty in understanding my meaning when I asked the question whether the end of anything would be that which could not be accomplished, or not so well accomplished, by any other thing?⁷

In fact this simplicity seemed crude and unbecoming to the Athenian intelligentsia, though their wring-minded opinions did not affect Socrates' or Plato's use of it, nor lessen its worth. Alcibiades in the Symposium gives a picture of the homely character of Socrates' discussion:

If anyone will listen to the talk of Socrates, it will appear to him at first extremely ridiculous. He is always talking about great market-asses, and brass founders, and leather cutters, and skin dressers; and this is his perpetual custom, so that any dull and unobservant person might easily laugh at his discourses.⁸

Simple they are, but for that very reason they have a high place in the literature of the world.

To this point perhaps, Plato has not exceeded other eminent philosophers in the written presentation of his thoughts; but when we consider the qualitative principles, force and elegance, we shall see where Plato's superiority lies. Other philosophers may want nothing in worthwhile ideas to communicate, in unity of subject, and coherence of arrangement. In fact philosophical writings are famous for their importance of content and order-

liness of procedure. A philosopher naturally writes that way. His long training in intellectual pursuits, in analysis, in classification, in deep penetration have fitted him for this carefulness in writing. But his training does not fit him for literary preeminence, as most philosophical disquisitions reveal. Still philosophy and literary style are not repugnant, and the introduction of emotion and imagination into such works, however difficult to achieve, is no demerit but a positive advantage. That is where Plato's genius shines forth. That is what makes his dialogues so enjoyable and interesting.

Force, or the emotional interest of the dialogues, is also a result in part of the Socratic method.

The dialogues have often been called dramatic dialogues, and it is this dramatic character that primarily adds to their forcefulness. Drama is a human conflict, and in the dialogues there is an ever present conflict - in an intellectual sphere, it is true - but not of mere abstractions. A notable example of this we find in the Republic, where Socrates and the surly and confident Thrasymachus (with no little heat on the part of Thrasymachus) take the field in defense of what each considers justice. The dialogues always have something of the nature of a fight, even when the discussion is not so animated, so that even the bystander or reader takes sides with the protagonists. The interest which these discussions had for the disciples of Socrates is explained by that eminent jousting in his Apology:

But why then do some people love to spend much of their time with me? You have heard the reason, men of Athens; for I told you the whole truth; it is because they like to listen when those are examined who think they are wise and are not so; for it is entertaining. *ἐστὶ γὰρ οὐκ ἄγος.* 9

Humor is one of the strongest emotional appeals of literature. It,

too, is characteristic of the Socratic method, and lends much interest to the dialogues. Usually the type of humor found is irony, though often enough it is supplied by a pleasantry or passing joke or by a humorous comparison. In the Republic, Socrates says to Thrasymachus, "And do you imagine that I am such a madman as to try to cheat Thrasymachus? I might as well shave a lion."¹⁰

Plato's appreciation of the value of humor is apparent from a passage in the Philebus: "ἀνάπαυλα γάρ, ὦ Πρωταρχε, τῆς σπουδῆς γίγνεται ἐνίοτε ἡ παιδία. Yes, Protarchus, for sometimes a joke is a restful change from serious talk."¹¹ But irony is such a characteristic of Socrates that the term Socratic Irony has become a commonplace in literary parlance. Sometimes it is mild and gentle, sometimes cutting and caustic, but almost always present. The whole thing revolves about the point that Socrates, who claims not to know anything, is the one who really has wisdom, while his adversary, who willingly admits that he has knowledge, is found to know next to nothing.

There is a very gentle hint of irony in this passage from the Protagoras:

I used formerly to think that there was no human treatment by which the good were made good, but now I am convinced (by Protagoras) that there is. Only I find one slight difficulty, which Protagoras will of course easily explain away, since he has explained so many puzzles already.¹²

But the irony is not nearly so veiled in the following excerpts. Socrates says to Euthydemus and Dionysiodorus:

If I may advise you, beware of talking before a number of people, lest they learn the whole thing (the art of winning any argument, true or false) in a trice and give you no credit for it. The best thing for you is to talk to each other by yourselves, in private; failing that, if a third person is present, it must be someone who will pay you a good fee. And if you are prudent, you will give this same counsel to your pupils also - that they are never to converse with anybody except you and each other.¹³

And in the Republic, Socrates addresses Thrasymachus:

Let me first understand you, I replied. Justice, as you say,

is the interest of the stronger. What, Thrasyarchus, is the meaning of this? You can not mean to say that because Polydamus, the pancratiast, is stronger than we are, and finds the eating of beef conducive to his bodily strength, that to eat beef is therefore equally for our good who are weaker than he is, and right and just for us?¹⁴

The last of the principles of quality, elegance, is present in the dialogues, but this quality, frankly, can not be attributed to the Socratic method or to anything else but to a natural gift. Elegance, the imaginative or aesthetic appeal of literature, is the hardest to define, and the most intangible. Some call it beauty; others, charm; still others, grace. How a person may put it into his writing is equally hard to tell. It can be increased by practice and observation, but can not be explained by rule. It is like taste, something innate, differing in every man. That it is present in the dialogues is an indisputable fact. They have charm, grace, beauty, elegance, or what you will. No one denies it. But since this is a natural gift, not acquired, we can not say it is a result of the Socratic method or of any other set of rules, so we leave it there.

So far we have considered in general how the Socratic method profits Plato in a literary way. But these principles of structure and quality apply equally to all types of literature, whether of poetry or of prose. Considering now the particular type of Plato's dialogues, exposition, we shall see whether there is not some peculiar value which the Socratic method adds to this type.

Exposition is intended to instruct the reader or hearer. Education is its end. Socrates teaching the Athenians what virtue is and how to find it, Plato teaching them a complete system of philosophy for making their lives happier, fell into exposition as the natural literary type for their purpose of instruction. The best method which they found for imparting know-

ledge was the dialectic system we call the Socratic method. Dr. Zeller says:

For Socrates, this mode of intercourse has not merely an educational value, procuring easier access and more fruitful effect for his ideas, but it is to his mind an indispensable condition to the development of thought.¹⁵

And what applies to Socrates applies as well to his pupil Plato, as is evident from his constant use of this method.

The question is why has the Socratic method this value. The answer: It conforms to the general canons of effective writing and in particular it is based on sound psychological principles of pedagogy.

The chief interest of the pedagogue is clarity and interest in his presentation. Without them he can not hope to bridge the gap between his mind and his pupil's. With them he clothes his ideas in an attractive aura which relieves the drudgery of learning, speeds up the process of comprehension, and stimulates the student to greater efforts.

Following the canons for all effective writing, Plato obtains these qualities of clarity and interest. Clarity results from his unified, coherent, well proportioned discourses, which contain the qualities of simplicity, illustration, and repetition. Interest comes from an appeal to emotion and imagination - from the dramatic and humorous quality of his writings, and from his fine appreciation of the beautiful in language. But there are particular means, elements of the Socratic method, by which Plato stimulates interest. These means are the sound psychological principles of the Socratic method.

First of all, Socrates or Plato wins the interest of the other party to the discussion, and through him of the reader, by gentle encouragement and harmless flattery of his ego. Everyone likes to have his opinion asked. So when Socrates asks one of his fellows to tell him the nature of

justice or virtue or holiness, that person, feeling his own importance, eagerly attempts to supply the information. A humorous instance of Socrates' deference to others occurs in the Euthyphro:

Then the best thing for me, my admirable Euthyphro, is to become your pupil, and, before the suit with Meletus comes on, to challenge him and say that I always thought it very important before to know about divine matters and that now, since he says I am doing wrong by acting carelessly and making innovation in matters of religion, I have become your pupil. And "Meletus," I should say, "if you acknowledge that Euthyphro is wise in such matters, then believe me that I also hold correct opinions, and do not bring me to trial; and if you do not acknowledge that, then bring a suit against him, my teacher, rather than against me."¹⁶

Then having won the attention of his pupil, Socrates gives him an active part in the instruction that follows. Passive reception makes learning dull and difficult. To counteract this passivity, Socrates keeps the mind of the pupil occupied by making him a party to the investigation, requiring his opinion at every step. "Socrates," says M.E.J. Taylor, "would not save people the trouble of thinking for themselves, but he showed them how to think, by thinking things out with them in conversation."¹⁷ And this is the best way of teaching after all. For what a person discovers for himself makes a stronger impression than that which he hears from another. In fact Socrates scarcely seemed the teacher, but a sort of humble assistant in the process of learning. He refers to himself as a midwife to the ideas of another, not as the father of those ideas. He thought it better to assist others in the travail with ideas than to be the cause of those ideas in them. From the Theaetetus we shall quote but one of the frequent allusions to himself in this capacity of midwife: "All that is true of the art of midwifery is true also of mine, but mine differs from theirs in being practised upon men, not women, and in tending their souls in labor, not their bodies."¹⁸ Socrates, no doubt, would not approve of our present lecture system in philosophy.

Another way Socrates has of arousing the interest of his pupils in knowledge is to upset their complacency, to show them how inaccurate is their own knowledge. Not merely showing them how to arrive at knowledge, he stimulates them to seek it for themselves by demonstrating their own deficiencies. True, not all took kindly to the exposé of their ignorance, but those who were wise and capable of wisdom were anxious for guidance along the arduous path of wisdom. We find an example of this disruption of a pupil's self-satisfaction in the Meno:

I consider, Socrates, that both in your appearance and in other respects you are extremely like the flat torpedo sea-fish; for it benumbs anyone who approaches it, and something of the sort is what I find you have done to me now. For in truth I feel my soul and my tongue quite benumbed, and I am at a loss what answer to give you. And yet on countless occasions I have made abundant speeches on virtue to various people - but now I can not say one word as to what it is.¹⁹

Meno was not as docile in his ignorance as he should have been for his own good, but at least he was made to distrust his own wisdom.

In conclusion, then, Plato not only had important and worthwhile doctrines to teach, but he knew how to present them as a masterful teacher. Combining his own genius with the method which he received from his master, Socrates, he gave us philosophical essays, the literary merit of which has not been surpassed to our own day. The effectiveness of his presentation is derived from his literary ability and from his understanding use of correct psychology in education. Plato adheres closely to the principles of structure and to the important principles of quality, for he who uses the Socratic method is under a natural necessity of following them. He demonstrates his ability as a teacher by winning immediate effort and attention of his pupil, by keeping that pupil active in the investigation of their problem, and by pulling him out of the mire of self-satisfaction. We do not think that

A. E. Taylor has estimated Plato's ability too highly:

Plato is the one man in history who has combined supreme greatness as a philosophic thinker with equal greatness as a master of language, and so has been, directly or indirectly, the teacher of thinking men since his own day.²⁰

NOTES TO CHAPTER IV

1. Turner, History of Philosophy, p. 120
2. Bates, Arlo Talks on Writing English, p. 33
3. Bates, Talks on Writing English, p. 59
4. Meno, 82B
5. Phaedo, 103A
6. Euthydemus, 279B
7. Republic, Bk. I, 352E
8. Symposium, 221E
9. Apology, 33C
10. Republic, Bk. I, 341C
11. Philebus, 30E
12. Protagoras, 328E
13. Euthydemus, 304A
14. Republic, Bk. I, 338C
15. Zeller, Socrates and the Socratic Schools, p. 125
16. Euthyphro, 5A
17. Taylor, Greek Philosophy, p. 73
18. Theaetetus, 150B
19. Meno, 80A
20. Taylor, A.E., Socrates, p. 130

CHAPTER V

THE INFLUENCE OF THE SOCRATIC METHOD

Just as the acorn grows into the stately oak, from which in turn may grow many acorns and many oaks, until we know not what forests of trees have arisen from that original seed, so a seedling idea, containing within itself potentialities for countless offspring, may extend its germ of life through the world of thought, even though the original parent be long forgotten. That is something of the function and fate of the Socratic method.

Until Socrates, an occasional philosopher had formed ingenious and sometimes brilliant hypotheses, but their thought was undisciplined and sporadic. Philosophy was going astray and losing its way for want of method. Then came Socrates with his method as a harness to unbridled thought. He brought philosophy back to the highroad, giving it new direction and new certitude. His method schooled men in the principles of logic, upon which rest all sure assent to a proposition. It demanded exact and exhaustive investigation of every hypothesis. It showed the way to syllogistic reasoning, the most accurate and certain expression of truth. It distinguished the two types of reasoning, induction and deduction, the means by which all human science may be excogitated. Though subsequent study developed these processes more fully and more accurately, they were all, nevertheless, contained in germ in the Socratic method. And thus, since it accustomed men to thinking logically, correctly, and purposefully, it was the unrecognized and indirect, perhaps, but none the less real parent of all other systems of knowledge.

Socrates, the originator of method, realized its necessity and insisted upon its usefulness. Though he might know nothing else, he claimed to know how to arrive at knowledge, and was satisfied that ^{if} he taught at least

the method to truth he had done something worthwhile. That his efforts were not without result is evident from the influence he had upon his contemporaries and upon succeeding ages.

The first and most direct influence of the Socratic method was on the followers of Socrates. Of these the most important was Plato, who was the most accurate and scientific recorder of the method of his master. Plato used the method very extensively in his investigation and his writings, and to good effect, we may say, for men still hail him as one of the world's greatest philosophers and writers. Other of Socrates' followers who used and popularized the Socratic method in their writings were Xenophon, Antisthenes, founder of the school of Cynics, Aristippus, founder of the Cyreniac school, and Aeschines, the orator. Many of their dialogues have been lost.

But the greatest man to use the Socratic method was Aristotle, the mightiest of pagan philosophers. Though in his preserved writings Aristotle did not use the dialectic form, he did in his earlier career write dialectic dialogues, which we do not possess today. Now Aristotle learned the Socratic method from Plato, whose pupil he was. Undoubtedly his early association with Plato and his early dialectic writing instilled in him mental habits which stayed with him the rest of his life, and to which he owes much of his success. His clear and excellent treatises on logic have their beginnings, very likely, in the Socratic dialectic. And all his success in other branches of philosophy can be said to have been conditioned by the discipline his genius received from an excellent teacher in an excellent method.

Since scholasticism is indebted so deeply to Aristotle, it is also indebted indirectly to Plato and Socrates for the training they gave him. And indeed the scholastic method bears no little resemblance to the Socratic

method, as we have shown above. Though the scholastic method is more detailed and more clearly defined than the Socratic method, the influence of the earlier is easily apparent. The careful examination of a question, the solution of all objections, the careful proof of the thesis, are common to both methods.

The influence of the Socratic upon the scientific method is not as easily traced historically as the influence of the Socratic upon the scholastic, but the similarity is even greater. The Socratic method applied to questions of physical science would be substantially the scientific method as we find it today. The careful examination of similar particulars, the formulation of a hypothesis as an explanation of the cause of this similarity, the testing of the hypothesis with additional observation, all are found in either system. It only took the transfer of interest from philosophy to physical science centuries later to show additional value of the Socratic method, even though it be called by another name, and even though its advocates did not realize the antiquity of their method.

Such has been the influence of the Socratic method in the past. And even today from the study of it we may draw profit, not only for philosophy and science, but for literature and education. The philosopher, indeed, will learn from it how to conduct an investigation for himself, the value of clearly defined concepts, and how to form them by sifting accidental from the essential. The student of physical science, also, will gain a better understanding from studying the Socratic method of the method especially adapted to those sciences. The student of literature and the hopeful author may learn many things, above all the advantage and manner of appealing to all the faculties, intellect, emotion, and imagination. The educator, too,

may pick up many principles of his calling by observing Socrates' ways - the principles of clarity and interest, above all, which come from simplicity and concrete illustration, from drawing ideas from the student through his active participation in the investigation, rather than from driving ideas into his head.

Thanks to the Socratic dialogues of Plato, then, this valuable method has influenced the thought of all the innumerable students of philosophy and physical science in the western world. Its influence has and will be, moreover, extended to the fields of literature and education. Like the little acorn from which has sprung the mighty oak forest, this method has been the partial cause of systems and movements of unlimited extent, and will continue to live in the spark of life by which new systems take existence from the old.

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The thesis, "Plato's Use of the Socratic Method", written by William J. Schmidt, S.J., has been accepted by the Graduate School with reference to form, and by the readers whose names appear below, with reference to content. It is, therefore, accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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